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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing divorce rate, little Canadian research has studied the effects of divorce on the school adjustment, education achievement, self-concept, and school absenteeism of children. To examine these effects, data were collected on second- through eighth-grade children from separated families. Mothers (N=16) were interviewed and the children (N=21) completed the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Test and the Wide Range Achievement Test. School achievement and ability of the children and of a matched group of 21 children from intact families were rated by teachers who also completed the Walker Problem Behavior Identification Checklist for each child. All children completed the Draw-a-Person Test. Teachers rated 50 percent of the children from separated families as achieving below grade placement compared to 29 percent of their two-parent peers. The results on the Draw-a-Person Test identified 33 percent of the children from separated families as being disturbed compared to 14 percent of the children from intact families. The teachers rated children from separated families as significantly higher in school problem behaviors than children from intact families, with a significant difference between the two groups in acting-out behavior. These findings support United States studies which found that children from separated families showed significantly more school-related problems than did children from intact families. Teachers and counselors need effective intervention programs to help children of separated families cope with their new family life. (NRB)

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Family Separation: Its Effects Upon the Education and Social-Emotional Growth of Children

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Abstract

This report examines the effects that family separation has on the school achievement, school behaviour, emotional growth, self-concept, and school absenteeism of a group of Canadian children. Data were collected on 21 children from 16 separated families, from their parents and teachers, and on an equal number of children from intact families. The results of this study indicate that children from separated families show significantly more school-related problem behaviours than do children from intact families.

Family Separation: Its Effects upon the Education and Social-Emotional Growth of Children

Despite the growing incidence of family separation, there is a lack of Canadian research directed toward studying the effects of this phenomenon upon the school adjustment, education achievement, self-concept, and school absenteeism of children. Little is known about the possible effects of family breakdown on children or the way in which school personnel might best help their pupils following family separation.

Divorce studies conducted in the United States indicate that there are no consistent findings regarding the impact of marital dissolution on children (Raschke and Raschke, 1979). Raschke and Raschke, for example, found that family structure made no significant difference in children's self-concept. Hammond (1979) found that girls from divorced families were not significantly different from girls from intact families. She discovered, however, that boys from divorced families were lower in arithmetic achievement, exhibited more distractible and acting-out behaviour and viewed their families as less happy than boys from intact families. Hetherington (1979) on the other hand found that adolescent girls' heterosexual development can be affected by divorce. A more recent study by Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) identified as many as 37 per cent of children from divorced families as depressed years after their families' separation and looked back to life before the divorce with intense longing.

A 1980 study sponsored by the National Association of Elementary School Principals included a total of 18,000 United States

school children. This survey found that children from single-parent families were lower in achievement, presenting more school discipline problems, and were absent from school more often than their two-parent peers. Similar results are reported by Brown (1980) who compared the differences in school achievement, tardiness, absenteeism, discipline problems, suspension, and dropouts of one-parent and two-parent children.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of family separation on the school achievement, school behaviour, emotional growth, self-concept, and school absenteeism of a group of Canadian children. Data were collected on 21 children from 16 separated families, from their teachers and parents, and from an equal number of children living in intact families. The study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between children of separated and intact families in

    (a) school achievement?

    (b) problem behaviours in school?

    (c) emotional adjustment?

    (d) absenteeism?

2. Do children from separated families develop a poor self-concept?

3. What percentage of children from separated families have school-related problems?

Method

Subjects and Setting

The population of this study consisted of children from separated and intact families enrolled in grade two to grade eight in a middle-class urban community in British Columbia. Sixteen separated families

with 21 children were involved in this study. The group consisted of 15 boys and 6 girls. The families were identified by the Single Parent Centre which operates in the community. The length of time following each family's separation ranged from 16 months to 11 years with the average length of the separation being 5 years and 7 months.

Children from intact families were identified by having the teachers of the children from separated families identify a group of children from their classrooms who were known to be from an intact family. One child of the same sex as the participating child was selected at random from each of these classroom groups. Thus children from separated and intact families were matched by grade and sex.

Procedure

Thirty-one single parents (all mothers) who had visited the Single Parent Centre during the past two years and who had school-aged children were invited to participate in this study. A letter which described the purpose of the study and a consent form requesting permission to interview family members, to test the children, and to obtain information from schools on each child's school achievement and behaviour was sent to each parent. Sixteen of the 31 families returned the consent forms and became part of the study.

An 1-hour interview was conducted with each of the single parents. During the interview each parent was asked what they considered to be:

1. the period, following the family separation, during which their children appeared to require the greatest amount of emotional support.

2. the most beneficial and harmful effects the family separation had on their children.

3. lasting changes in their children's behaviour brought about by the separation.

4. important agencies or personnel from whom support services should be made available to children of separated or divorced families. In addition, parents were asked to list and evaluate the agencies or persons from whom their children had received assistance.

Following the interview the children in the family were administered the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Test, the Wide Range Achievement Test, and the Draw-a-Person Test. Several months later, the school achievement and ability of the children from separated and intact families were rated by their teachers on a 5-point scale. The teachers also completed the Walker Problem Behavior Identification Checklist on each of the children.

To obtain drawings from children of intact families, teachers in one school were asked to have all children in their classes draw a picture of a person. The directions given by the teachers were the same as those given to the children from separated families. The drawings of children identified by their teachers as coming from intact families were then selected and grouped by grade and sex. From these groups, drawings were randomly selected to match the grade and sex of each of the participating children. The drawings of the two groups were then mixed together and rated by a clinical psychologist. The Machover Draw-a-Person scale was used to assess the emotional adjustment of each child. As the drawings were mixed together, the psychologist remained unaware of which children were from separated families and which were from intact families. Following the scoring of the dr-

drawings the psychologist separated the children into three groups: children exhibiting emotional disturbance, children with mild problems, and children demonstrating emotional maturity.

Results

Achievement

An analysis of teachers' ratings of the achievement of 20 pupils from separated families and 17 children from intact families on a 5-point scale indicated that 10 (50 per cent) of the children from separated families were judged to be achieving below grade placement, while five (29 per cent) of their two-parent peers were identified as functioning below their grade level. Teachers also rated 14 (70 per cent) of the children from separated families as working below their ability about half of the time or more as compared to eight (47 per cent) of the children from intact families. These results are summarized in Table I.

Place Table I About Here

On the WRAT achievement scores of the children from separated families were judged against the test norms. The average grade placement of the 21 children at the time of testing was 5.0. On the spelling, arithmetic, and reading sub-tests the mean scores reported as grade placements were 5.6, 5.2, and 5.6 respectively. Twelve of the 21 children (51 per cent) scored below actual grade placement on the arithmetic sub-test while five children (24 per cent) and six children (29 per cent) scored below grade placement, on the spelling and reading sub-tests.

Emotional Adjustment

The results on the Draw-a-Person Test identified seven of the 21 children (33 per cent) from separated families as being disturbed compared to three children (14 per cent) from intact families. Seven children (33 per cent) from separated families were included in the middle group as compared to eight children (38 per cent) from intact families. The emotionally mature group included six children (29 per cent) from separated families and 10 children (48 per cent) from intact families. The results are shown in Table II.

Place Table II About Here

School Behaviour

The Mann-Whitney U Test was used to determine the differences between the two groups based on teachers' ratings on the Walker Problem Behaviour Identification Checklist. The teachers rated children from separated families as significantly higher ($\rho<.04$) in school problem behaviours than children from intact families. Results are shown in Table III.

Place Table III About Here

There was a significant difference between the two groups in the area of "acting-out" ($\rho<.03$). The differences between the two groups approached significance in the areas of "withdrawal" ($\rho<.07$) and "distractibility" ($\rho<.10$). The differences between the boys in each group approached significance in the area of "peer relationships" ($\rho<.09$).

Self-Concept

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Test scores for children from separated families were compared to the test norms. Three of the 21 children (13 per cent) scored below average indicating a poor self-concept. Fourteen children achieved scores within the average range while four children achieved above-average scores.

Absenteeism

The absenteeism of children from the separated families in this study was compared to the absentee rate of children from two-parent families attending five schools in the community. The average number of school days missed by children from the separated families during the past year was 8.2 as compared to 7.1 days for children from two-parent families.

Single Parents' Perceptions of the Effects of Family Separation/Divorce on Children

Time of intense emotional upset

Slightly more than half of the parents interviewed identified the six months following their family breakup as the time during which their children experienced the most intense emotional upset. Many parents admitted that their own stress, conflict, and confusion resulted in difficulty providing their children the emotional support required. On the other hand, just less than half the parents identified pre-adolescence (ages 7 to 10) as the most difficult time for their children. It is at this age according to these parents that boys in particular evidenced a growing desire for their father's presence.

Adverse effects

The adverse effects of family separation for children according to the parents interviewed are the lack of a male model in the home and the lack of money. Mothers of both boys and girls identified the lack of a male model and influence as a major disadvantage for their children. Several parents stated that their sons were less mature than other boys of their age and attributed this to the absence of a male after whom their sons could model themselves. The lack of money resulted in their children not being able to do nor have what other children in the community enjoyed. According to several parents, this resulted in their children feeling left out of the mainstream of community activities.

Beneficial effects

The beneficial effects of family separation for children according to the majority of parents is the removal of the children from a home in which tension, strife, and hostility predominated. Five of the 16 parents, however, could find no beneficial effects that their family's separation offered their children.

Lasting effects

Parents listed the following sets of behaviours as those presently exhibited by their children and those which they attributed to family separation: aggressive behaviour toward family members, withdrawal, disruptive school behaviour, poor school work, bad temper, nervous habits, and poor relations with males and with peers. Only one parent stated that there were no unusual behaviours exhibited by her children which she could attribute to family separation, while two parents

reported the effects as positive, that being a closer relationship between family members.

Support agencies or personnel

All parents interviewed looked to school personnel as a major source of assistance for their children. The parents were unanimous in their opinion that teachers should be made aware of the family separation. This information places the teacher in a position to understand and treat unusual child behaviour in an empathetic and sensitive manner.

Half of the parents thought that group counselling sessions, led by a school counsellor, would be helpful. Group counselling would provide children of separated families with the opportunity to share common problems and concerns. As one parent stated, "just to know that others have similar problems would be a relief to my children."

Five parents identified Big Brothers as an important source of help for their sons, yet expressed disappointment with the long waiting lists, the turnover of big brothers, and that a big brother was not available to children under the age of eight.

Discussion

The results of this study are supported by studies from the United States which indicate that family separation and divorce produce changes in a child's behaviour. The behaviours often affected are "acting-out" (Hammond, 1979) and school achievement (Essen, 1979; Hammond, 1979; Derdyn, 1980).

The school is a logical setting in which children can be helped to cope with the external events which separation and divorce bring to

their lives (Cantor, 1977; Drake, 1979; Bledsoe, 1979). It is this setting which provides children with professionals trained to work with children as well as peers who have experienced similar difficulties. Teachers, who have the most contact with pupils, are in a position to provide the greatest assistance to their pupils and must become aware of the problems and symptoms associated with family separation. Presenting symptoms typically include acting-out, diminishing academic performance, aggressive behaviour toward teacher and peers, withdrawal, and depression (Derdyn, 1980; Hammond, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Teachers must be alerted to these symptoms and make themselves aware of family circumstances in order to deal effectively and sensitively with the many children who come to school torn with the pain that comes from family separation.

It is also the obligation of the school counselling staff to expand their services to include this group of children (Bledsoe, 1979; Cantor, 1977). Cantor (1977) states that group counselling with a trained leader can "provide ongoing support and immediate crisis intervention to avert later, serious personality disorders" (p. 187). During group sessions the child can be provided the opportunity to share experiences and information, express fears, anxieties, and possibly guilt, and above all to realize that they are not alone with the emotions they are or have experienced.

There are a number of specific intervention programs in the research literature for counselling children of family separation and divorce (Sonnenshein-Schneider & Baird, 1980; Scherman, 1979; Green, 1978; Wilkinson & Bleck, 1977; Magid, 1977; Cantor, 1977; Kessler & Bostwick,

1977). In many instances the counselling programs developed are outlined session by session and serve as potential models.

The self-concept of children from separated families is in need of further investigation. Scores on the Piers-Harris indicate that only 13 per cent of the children from separated families in this study suffered a loss of self-concept. These findings are supported by Hammond (1979) and Berg and Kelly (1979), who found that children from divorced families had self-esteem levels comparable to those of children from intact families. However, scores on the Piers-Harris, as a self-report measure, can be affected by children wanting to provide socially acceptable answers (Berg & Kelly, 1979). This factor may be particularly pertinent to this study as all children completed the 80-item scale in their homes. The presence of the mother in the home, and sometimes in the same room, may have provided the child with additional pressure to provide responses acceptable to her.

Further evidence is lent to this notion when comparing the results of the Piers-Harris with other measures of emotional adjustment, namely the Draw-a-Person, Walker Behaviour Identification Checklist, and the number of children referred by their parents for professional counselling. While scores on the Piers-Harris indicated that only 13 per cent of the children from separated families suffered a loss of self-concept, the Draw-a-Person identified 33 per cent of the group to be disturbed, the Walker Checklist identified 30 per cent as disturbed and 43 per cent of the group had been referred for counselling. It appears that caution is required with the use of scores from self-report scales.

The achievement scores earned by Canadian children on the Wide Range Achievement Test are also in need of close scrutinization. A number of educational psychologists working in this community judge the WRAT to inflate the scores of Canadian children as much as one year. Interestingly, when one year was subtracted from each of the sub-test scores on the WRAT, 10 of the 21 children achieved scores below grade placement on all three sub-tests: arithmetic, reading, and spelling. Ten of these children were also rated by their teachers as achieving below their grade level. Only in two cases did the teachers' judgment and WRAT scores differ when one year was subtracted from each sub-test. In one case a primary child was judged by the teacher to be at grade level when the WRAT placed the child below grade placement. In the second case a grade eight student was judged by his teacher to be achieving below grade level, yet the scores on the WRAT placed the student an average of three years and three months above his present grade level.

In conclusion, this study, supported by studies from the United States, indicates that children from separated and divorced families show significantly more school-related problems than do children living in intact families. Further research should be directed toward isolating other possible problem areas. In addition and perhaps more importantly, research directed toward evaluating programs aimed at helping children readjust and accept the realities of their family's separation is urgently needed. Counselling programs, teacher intervention, and bibliotherapy have been suggested by parents, teachers, and counsellors. However, there are few if any of these programs

whose efficacy has been determined empirically. Pragmatic and empirically established intervention programs to help children of separated families are now in need of our most vigorous investigation.

Table I.

Number of Children from Separated and Intact Families Grouped According to Teachers Rating on Achievement and Ability.

	Achievement below grade placement	Work below Ability
Separated (20 children)	10 (50%)	14 (70%)
Intact (17 children)	5 (29%)	8 (47%)

Table II.

Numbers of Children from Separated and Intact Families Grouped According to Emotional Adjustment on Draw-a-Person Test.

	Disturbed	Mild Problems	Mature
Separated Families	7 (33%)	7 (33%)	6 (29%)
Intact Families	3 (14%)	8 (38%)	10 (48%)

Table III. Mean Scores on School Problem Behaviors for Boys and Girls From Intact and Separated Families.

Problem Behaviors	Separated Families		Intact Families		Significant P
	# of pupils	Mean Scores	# of pupils	Mean Scores	
Total	20	13.8	19	7.1	$p < .04$
Boys	14	14.7	14	8.0	$p < .07$
Girls	6	12.0	5	4.8	$p < .41$
Acting-out					
Total	20	4.0	19	1.8	$p < .03$
Boys	14	3.9	14	2.5	$p < .10$
Girls	6	4.1	5	0.2	$p < .25$
Withdrawal					
Total	20	2.2	19	1.2	$p < .07$
Boys	14	2.4	14	1.1	$p < .20$
Girls	6	1.5	5	1.4	$p < .18$
Distractability					
Total	20	4.4	19	2.9	$p < .10$
Boys	14	4.6	14	3.1	$p < .20$
Girls					$p < .27$
Peer Relations					
Total	20	1.8	19	0.6	$p < .15$
Boys	14	2.0	14	0.9	$p < .44$
Girls	6	1.3	5	0.0	$p < .09$
Immaturity					
Total	20	1.6	19	0.6	$p < .23$
Boys	14	1.9	14	0.5	$p < .15$
Girls	6	0.9	5	0.8	$p < .92$

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